

**“The Perfecting of the Chopin Valse No. 14 in E Minor”**

Questions for Reflection

- a) At the end of this story, the mother is gone, beyond contact, albeit only to England. Consider how a realist story would present the decline and “loss” of an aging parent and how that would contrast with this story. Explain how this contrast illustrates the “joke played on realism” that literary critic David Young describes as the heart of magic realism.
- b) A garden can be seen as the intersection of humans with the natural world, and more particularly as a place where humans attempt to manipulate or control nature, to shape it to produce what they want. This tension is present in the following quote from the story: “That August, gesturing toward the garden, a friend who raised berries told me that death was part of life; she pointed at the seasonal changes. We stood on the patio talking while the Chopin *Valse No. 14* rolled out the windows. . . . I told my friend that the gulf between the seasonal lives of flowers and the lives of human beings was unbridgeable.” Using this quote, explain how Naslund uses the garden to represent a human conflict with nature and the resolution of that conflict. Be sure to consider the ending of the story.
- c) A garden can also be seen as a work of art, the artful shaping of the plant world or natural landscape. What does Naslund’s story suggest about the relation and possible tension between nature and art as a human act or product? Again, be sure to consider the ending of the story!
- d) Music is central to this story, as indicated by its title. Explain how Naslund uses music symbolically throughout the story. What does the “perfecting of the Chopin *Valse No. 14 in E Minor*” represent?
- e) At the center of this story sits a massive stone, and the daughter experiences fears that she herself is turning to stone: “Even as I tried mentally to formulate an inquiry, my body stiffened. I resisted that stillness. I would not be frozen into stone in my own garden in late summer. I would not take on that terrible rigidity.” Explain how the stone functions symbolically in the story, how Naslund uses it in exploring central themes such as art/music, human accomplishment, the power of nature, etc.
- f) Describe the relationship between the mother and the daughter and how it changes in the course of the story. Explain how the story depicts this change and why. How is the situation at the end different from that in the beginning? Consider how the shift in the story may symbolically represent an ordinary or realistic relationship between aging parent and adult child.